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AUTHOR LoCastro, Virginia
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ABSTRACT

A contrastive study of Japanese and American English sought to explore how speakers agree and disagree in the two languages. Japanese-speaking college students and American English-speaking teachers of English as a foreign language were informally questioned about food preferences, with their comments surreptitiously recorded for analysis. Results indicated that, on the surface, there are no significant differences between the Japanese and American English way of agreeing and disagreeing. When questions about food preferences were phrased in a certain way in either language, they seemed to encourage agreement. Japanese speakers did appear to be a little more indirect in stating food preferences, perhaps because they were more concerned about not offending their conversational partners. The issue of agreement and disagreement in these two langages is very complex, and assumptions should not be made too quickly concerning possible universality. (CB)

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# Yes, I agree with you, but...:Agreement and disagreement in Japanese and American English

By Virginia LoCastro, The University of Tsukuba

## 1. INTRODUCTION

This contrastive study of Japanese and American English is an attempt to shed some light on the question of how people agree and disagree in the two languages. The purpose is therefore to cause a reexamination of the assumption that speech acts are universal, the presupposition that seems to underlie much of current ELT practices.

## 2. LITERATURE REVIEW

This paper looks at the assumption implicit in most, if not all, ELT materials that purport to teach functions/notions. The assumption is that, for the language learner, it is only a matter of learning new words, new expressions of the target language to do what one is already doing in one's own language. This may be true at a very general functional level of analysis. However, once social man/woman enters the picture, as Halliday (1978) might say, then one must reconsider the underlying presupposition of the universality of speech acts. The realization of speech acts is governed by the norms of different speech communities and indeed reflects and reinforces those cultural norms and values. In analyzing speech acts, one examines "how to do things with words," to use Austin's (1962) title: one examines language in use. Clearly the interest in notions and functions that one finds in ELT coursebooks developed

from such research concerns.

By "speech act," I mean what Austin (1962) calls an illocutionary act. (See Levinson, 1981 for a discussion of speech acts.) Fraser (1978, 1982) strongly believes speech act strategies are universal. Speech act strategies, for Fraser, are ways of performing speech acts having particular sentential forms and meanings. He goes so far as to say second language learners need not learn "how to code their intentions" in the target language. Rather they need only acquire the linguistic means to express their meanings and then to learn the rules of social appropriateness.(1)

Blum-Kulka (1983) disagrees. She feels learners often fail to correctly execute speech acts in a target language because they do not adequately convey the full illocutionary force of the speech act, partly because they have insufficient knowledge of the social appropriateness rules.

One example from her study of the nature of cross-cultural variation in speech act patterns between Hebrew and English is that of tag questions which can be used to mitigate requests in English, as in "That won't be too much trouble for you, will it?" However, there is no syntactic equivalent in Hebrew to the use of English tag questions for the purpose of mitigation. Therefore, in this example at least, grammatical form can limit directness. The Hebrew speakers of English may lack the awareness of this culturally specific norm of directness/indirectness which affects the illocutionary force of the speech act.

Blum- Kulka's argument seems plausible when she concludes that a scale of directness (2) probably exists as one of the basic properties of speech acts and is shared across languages. Nevertheless, she states that one must take into account (1) pragmatic considerations, (2) linguistic meaning, and (3) social rules of usage, individually and then in combination before universality can be accepted.

Fraser's (1982) strong statement in favor of universality is backed up by flimsy empirical studies. Though Fraser is clearly aware that a speech act is not equivalent to a particular form, he does seem to have remained at the level of linguistic realization. He relies on intuition for data, not really having grasped the notion that a speech act depends on the social relationship between the speaker and the hearer for correct interpretation by the hearer.

His example of a universal speech act is "Can you pass the salt?" However, these words have two readings. The two readings can be more clearly understood with an example such as "Can you take time off from work on Saturday morning?" This question is more likely to be understood as a request if the hearer is younger, of lower status, and/or has an intimate relationship with the speaker. The second reading, as a query about the hearer's ability to pass the salt, is more likely if the hearer is of higher status, older, and/or has a distant relationship with the speaker. The changing of "can" to "could" as a mitigating device is more apt to occur in the second instance for the same reasons.

Fraser and some others are guilty of what Pratt (1981) describes

as adopting speech-act theory as a "complement to autonomous linguistics, sort of a guest wing added to the house of Chomsky" (p.6). Moreover, when social appropriateness is brought into the picture, it is as if it were added onto the linguistic form. Pratt considers it axiomatic that individuals are always in a social context, that they speak from a "socially-constituted position," and can not do otherwise. "Beliefs, desires, and intentions" are not individualistic, but rather subject to the speech situation and are mutually interdependent. Ochs (1984) writes that in Samoan society the speech act of guessing can be constrained by social rank: lower-ranking individuals are expected to assume the perspective of higher-ranking persons as it is considered to be a fundamental component of showing respect. Guessing should not be done by a higher-ranking individual because this would mean such an individual would have to do more work at perspective-taking to understand lower-ranking individuals. Social dimensions are not additions, but are interwoven into discourse as it is created.

Rivers (1983) surveys some of the recent literature related to the study of human conceptual and perceptual systems. She raises the question of interference from first to second language, or transfer, to use a more positive word, occurring at the morphological or conceptual levels. For example, as plurality is not a category that is realized by morphemes in Japanese, the Japanese learner of English frequently leaves "s" off words or adds them unnecessarily. She is primarily concerned with grammatical errors of English-speakers studying a Romance

language, such as those with gender, agreement, and the subjunctive. Some disagree with Rivers, stating that she attaches more importance to transfer than current second language acquisition theory indicates actually occurs.

According to Rivers, the underlying problem may not be at the morphological but at the conceptual level: she states there is an "interlingual conceptual contrast" (p.162). This means that, to go back to the example given above, Japanese learners of English have trouble with remembering to add "s" because the concept of plurality is different in the two languages. Likewise, English speakers do not divide objects in the world into male and female as one must do to speak a Romance language correctly. Besides acquiring elements of the target language, students must be able to function within the total meaning system of that language. Schmidt and Richards (1980) agree, stating: "They need to learn the general 'ethos' of the new speech community" (p.140-141).

Wierzbicka (1985) suggests that there are two ways to analyze speech acts cross-culturally: from the outside or from the inside of the culture. Both approaches are problematic: if one is on the outside, using one variety of English, one gets an English description which is culture specific. What is inherent to the culture under analysis may be missed. Moreover, as there are several varieties of English in the world, one must know which variety the analyst is using. With the second approach, the outsider may not grasp the full semantic load and illocutionary force. Wierzbicka gives an example, comparing the speech act of "warning" in English and of "satosu" in Japanese;

she claims that the Japanese word has the meaning that the person doing the "warning" is taking the role, perhaps only temporarily, of "parent" to the person being warned. The related speech act in English can, but does not necessarily include that meaning.

My discussion on agreement/disagreement then develops from the point of view that language must be interpreted in its sociocultural context. I chose agreement/disagreement to investigate the stereotype that says that Japanese will always agree with whatever is said to maintain social harmony, whereas Americans will aggressively state their true feelings in all situations. It is also a speech act that appears in tables of contents of many ELT coursebooks and materials.

The literature on speech acts gives little attention to agreement/disagreement. Wolfson (1981) and Manes (1983) have considered compliments, Irvine (1974) greetings in the Wolof language; Blum-Kulka (1983) deals with directness and indirectness in English and Hebrew, Fraser with apologizing (1978, 1982), Olshtain and Cohen also consider apologizing (1983) and Ochs clarification in Samoan (1984).

Eloise Pearson, in her M.A. thesis at the University of Hawaii, has looked at agreement/disagreement, comparing what native speakers of American English do with what two notional/functional ESL/EFL textbooks say they do. In the naturally occurring conversational data she collected, agreement occurred 75% of the time whereas in Textbook I, it occurred 45% and in Textbook II, 39%. On the other hand, disagreement occurred only 30% of the time in the natural data, compared with 55% in Textbook I and

62% in Textbook II. As Pearson concludes, students may then infer disagreement occurs more frequently than it actually does; they do, at least, get more practice with disagreement than with agreement. It could be argued that the practice is necessary as disagreement is more complex.

On the more theoretical side, Leech (1983) tries to account for the relationship of meaning and illocutionary force with the Cooperative Principle. He adds several maxims such as the Tact Maxim and the Agreement Maxim to his taxonomy. They are composed of bipolar scales indicating cost-benefit to the self and the other. The Agreement Maxim (a) minimizes disagreement between self and other, and consequently (b) maximizes agreement between self and other. Leech states that there is a general tendency to emphasize agreement and to mitigate disagreement through showing partial agreement, expressing regret, and using hedges.

Brown and Levinson (1978) list universal strategies used by the speaker in the category of positive-politeness strategies. They include seeking agreement and avoiding disagreement. In the sub-category of claiming common ground, the speaker will attempt to indicate that both the speaker and hearer are in the same set of persons who share wants and goals. One way to do so is to seek agreement by staying with safe topics, or by repeating part of what the previous speaker has just said in a conversation. Avoiding disagreement can be achieved by pretending to agree (token agreement), by displacing disagreement (agreeing with part of the previous statement only), or by telling

white lies and by hedging opinions with such expressions as "sort of," "well," and "really...in a way" (p. 117-122).

Pomerantz (1984) studied agreeing and disagreeing with assessments, one common conversational interaction. This is one example from her paper:

J: Let's feel the water. Oh, it...
R: It's wonderful. It's just right. It's like bathtub water.

In Pomerantz's analysis, J is inviting R to assess the water, and R does so. J could have resumed talking, agreeing or disagreeing with R's assessment of the water. R could have also declined to make an assessment. Thus Pomerantz proposes this turn sequence:

(optional) 1. suggestion for an assessment

2. (a) assessment or (b) declination of making one

If (a), then (optional) 3. agreement or disagreement with prior.

Assessments may be acts of praise, complaint, compliment, insult, bragging, self-deprecation. The agreement or disagreement that follows is often accompanied by a second assessment.

The initial assessment may be structured so as to elicit a preferred response. The alternative reply would be a dispreferred response. In most cases, agreement with the speaker's assessment is preferred except in the case of self-deprecation, in which case disagreement is preferred.

Pomerantz categorises the utterances of agreement or disagreement, taking into consideration the previous or initial assessment. Agreements, with agreement preferred, can be three types: (a) an upgrade (when the second assessment uses an even stronger expression of evaluation); (b) the same level (often

including the word "too"); or (c) a downgrade (with a scaled down or weaker evaluation).

Disagreements, when agreement is preferred, (and disagreement is dispreferred) are characterized as follows:(a) no immediately forthcoming talk (silence); (b) use of repair initiators (clarification is requested) ; (c) hesitation markers and fillers; and (d) a preface of disagreement by first agreeing followed by "but...," and then the disagreement.

If silence occurs, the first speaker may actually resume speaking and will reorient to what the hearer might have said. Or the speaker may back down and generally modify what had just been said in order to avoid or reduce direct disagreement.

Pomerantz concludes from her analysis of naturally occurring conversations that conversational partners generally seek agreement. In the case of dispreferred responses, there are built-in means in the turn sequences to avoid uncomfortable moments.

I know of very little other ethnographic research carried out to confirm or disconfirm assumptions about the universality of speech acts. Thus, I decided to do a contrastive analysis of Japanese and American agreement/disagreement.

## 3. PROCEDURES

First of all, I discussed what I wanted to do with two of my colleagues at Tsukuba University; one is a sociolinguist, the other, an anthropologist. Our discussion centered on the variables I would have to be aware of in attempting to elicit agreement or disagreement from Japanese informants. For example,

Japanese tend to respond on a questionnaire according to their perception of what the writer of the questionnaire wants. On Liket scales of 0 to 5, Japanese answers will cluster around 2-3-4, whereas other ethnic groups will show a greater range of responses. Moreover, we assumed an "on the street" interview would produce the same kind of non-committal results. Both of my colleagues felt strongly that such interviews are highly unusual in Japan, and the results would therefore not be informative for our purposes.

With all this in mind, I enlisted a second year male student of anthropology and linguistics who queried his fellow students of the same year and major about food tastes, while surreptiously recording their responses. He told them that he was helping a friend who had to do a survey of food tastes of undergraduates. My colleagues and I decided food would be a non-controversial topic, one which might lead to natural responses. Less personal face or identity would likely be involved than, for example, would questions about religion or politics. The choice of avocado as the food item for the query caused a lot of discussion. It is not a well-known food item in Japan, particularly not outside the urban areas. The Japanese assistant, however, selected it and felt most students would know about it and would have strong positive or negative opinions about it.

The assistant was involved in the discussion; this proved useful as he helped establish the context in which to get the most natural responses. Then the anthropologist and he worked out what he should say in Japanese. (I did not want them to

translate from what I had written in English as that would be contrary to my basic premise that more than words or fixed phrases are involved in the realization of speech acts.)

For the speakers of American English, I decided the peer group I would question would be other EFL teachers and, with some help from an American colleague, I collected reactions to a statement about food tastes as well. Unfortunately, some of the American English speaking informants have been in Japan for some time; this fact may distort their responses. Rather than taping the responses, moreover, I wrote down the person's response verbatim, as well as any particularly noticeable paralinguistic and/or non-verbal accompaniments. My Japanese assistant did the same.

To get the informants to go beyond social niceties and respond as frankly as possible, I set up two different kinds of solicits. 50% of the informants were asked one type, 50% the other. As my objective was not only to look at the rate of occurrence of agreement or disagreement, but also the actual realization of the speech act, I wanted to assure some examples of disagreement would be produced.

## 4. FINDINGS

Transcript A shows the Japanese data and Transcript B the American English data.

A.1

Question: Avocadotte oishito omowanai? (Don't you think avocados

are good?)

Answers: M=male F=female

1. (M) (He didn't say anything. He just shook his head. It seemed he didn't want to be too direct by saying "no.")

2. (M) "Un, sukidayo." ("Yeah, I like it.")

3. (M) "--------------Anmari sukijyanai." ("--------I don't like it so much.") (------=pause)

4. (F) "Un, omou." ("Yeah, I think so.") (3)

5. (F) "Suki! Daisuki!" ("I love it. I do love it.")

6. (M) "Unmaiyo." ("Delicious.")

7. (M) "Un." ("Yeah.")

A.2

Question: "(Nee) avocadotte oishīto omou?" (Do you really think avocados are good?)

Answers:

1. (F) "Un, omouyo...Kirai?" ("Yeah, I think so...You don't like them?"

2. (M) "Orewa--soone tokidoki pan ni hasande taberu. Oishīyo, tottemo." ("Well, sometimes, in a sandwich. Good, really good.")

3. (M) "------- sonnani oishīto omowanai." ("------I don't think it's that great.")

4. (M) "Ore kirai!" ("I don't like it.")

5. (M) "Aresa, wasabijōyude kūto umaiyo." ("It's great with soy sauce and wasabi") (with an embarrassed smile).

6. (F) "--------Un, omou." ("----Yeah, I think so.")(3)

7. (F) "NNNNNNN----Omou." ("Weeeeeeeell, I think so") ( with

an embarrassed smile).

B.1

Question: Avocados taste rather good, don't they?

1. (F) Yeah, not bad.

2. (M) Yeah.

3. (M) Yup. I like guacamole.

4. (M) I agree.

5. (F) Oh, I like avocados, but I hate liver.

6. (M) Ummmmm--In a salad, maybe.

B.2.

Question: Avocados don't taste very good, do they?

1. (M) Oh, I like them, but I don't eat them as much as I used to.

2. (M) I don't eat red meat or much Anglo-Saxon foods either.

3. (M) Really? I like them.

4. (F) (hesitation filler) Well, they certainly do.

5. (M) -------By themselves, no; but mixed with something else, they're great.

6. (M) Wrong! They taste wonderful.

5. DISCUSSION

The first question in Japanese (A.1),"Don't you think avocados are good?", clearly invites agreement. Five of the seven responses were the preferred response. The second question with falling-rising intonation (omouuu:LHLHH) roughly means "Do

you really think avocados are good?," expressing a negative attitude towards avocados by the speaker though with a positive question form. (With neutral intonation--omou: LHH--, the question could have two readings, one that the speaker didn't like avocados, the other more neutral.) Of the seven responses, five disagreed, a sixth partially disagreed, and only one agreed (#4). In all cases where the informants disagreed, there was some sign of discomfort or hesitation. (4)

With the English data, B.1 shows five out of the six responses indicating agreement with the speaker's positive statement about the taste of avocados. In the sixth response, there is hesitation followed by partial agreement. In the second case, B.2, when the speaker unambigously expresses negativeness about avocados, there is only one clear agreement or preferred response (#2) with a second (#5) showing partial agreement, followed by disagreement. The dispreferred response, disagreeing with the speaker, occurred in five cases (#1,3,4,5 and 6), with some hesitation in #4. This is contrary to what Pomerantz's study would have predicted.

Before attempting to interpret the data, one can make the following generalizations about the English data:

(a) The informants agreed with the speaker's positive statement about avocados in five out of six cases.

(b) The informants disagreed with the speaker's negative statement about avocados in five out of six cases.

(c) In three cases (B.1.6, B.2.4, and B.2.5), there is evidence of discomfort.

With the Japanese data, one can make the following generalizations:

(a) When the speaker spoke positively about avocados, the informants agreed in five out of seven cases.

(b) When the speaker spoke negatively about avocados, the informants disagreed in six out of seven cases.

(c) When there was disagreement with the speaker, there was hesitation in six out of seven cases, with even the seventh showing some hesitation after the initial response (A.2.1). Hesitation was manifested as silence, pauses, fillers ("Aresa," "Orewa," "NNN----,"), and smiles of embarrassment.

The American English responses are clearer with less hesitation and, at least when the topic is food, such as avocados, the informants seemed to express what we can assume to be their true opinions, even when that means disagreeing with one's conversational partner. It is noticeable as well that the agreement responses are relatively short whereas the disagreement responses are longer, with a tendency to be upgrades (#4,5, and 6).

In the Japanese data, the first question relating the speaker's positive attitude towards avocados elicited clear, predictable responses: mostly agreement or disagreement prefaced with hesitation. The responses to the second question followed that pattern as well. There does however seem to be more hesitation on the part of the Japanese informants: three cases out of twelve in the English data and eight out of fourteen in the Japanese.

The Japanese responses also seem to show less elaboration than the American English ones, though see A.2.2 and A.2.5. My colleague, Hiroko Ayabe (personal conversation) reminded me of the tendency in Japanese conversational interaction for the interlocutors not to carry on but to prefer to curtail discussion especially if it points toward argument. This may account for the shorter responses with only the two examples where the informant added more information. In six cases, the American informants elaborated (B.1.3, B.1.5, B.1.6, B.2.2, B.2.5).

## 6. CONCLUSION

What I set out to do with this contrastive study was to shed some light on the question of how people agree and disagree in Japanese and in English. I wanted to re-examine the assumption of the universality of speech acts. My only firm conclusion is that the issue is complex, and that one should not quickly jump to conclusions about universality.

On the surface, it seems that there are no significant differences between the Japanese and American English way of agreeing and disagreeing. Yet bilinguals feel there is a difference. Looking more carefully then at the data, one can tease out some tendencies. The second question in English--"Avocados aren't very good, are they?"--is negative in form. However, the Japanese one--"Nee avocadotte oishito omou?"--is positive in form with the speaker's attitude (neutral or negative) conveyed solely through the intonation. However, apparently the degree of negativity is felt to be less than that

of the English question. It is possible to change the English one so that it will be positive in its linguistic form, but it was felt that would not be the most natural way to express the meaning. This then seems to be one difference: the degree of expression of negativity and how it is done is different in Japanese and in English.

The positive question form in Japanese leads to another possible interpretation. G. Leech (personal communication) points out that the Japanese may not feel the threat of disagreement as strongly. Therefore, there is less of a tendency to mitigate and to use the indirectness of a negative question form.

The second difference arises not with agreement but with disagreement where the Japanese informants showed more hesitation, and more indirectness. It is possible that there are cultural differences in what one can or can not disagree about. Food tastes may be part of the public domain, in other words, "our territory," and so disagreement with someone's food preferences are acceptable in a particular culture. However, on the contrary, clothing, politics, religion, or music may be "my territory," where disagreement with one's choices would be unwelcome. There might be some socio-pragmatic variation here so that what is public domain in one culture may not be so in another (Jenny Thomas, personal communication).

Perhaps the stereotype is true. Americans, at least when it comes to such things as food, a topic in which one need not invest so much of oneself as in, say, politics, religion, and money, do not hesitate to state their preferences. Japanese may

be more concerned with not offending their conversational partners, even when discussing food. Social factors may be more salient. Going back to Blum-Kulka's statement that we must take into account pragmatic considerations, linguistic meaning, and social rules of usage, we can see here how at least linguistic meaning and social rules of usage are operative. They are perhaps weighted differently as they work in combination to determine the way in which speech acts are realized.

NOTES

(1) Social appropriateness can be defined as culturally specific perception of appropriate behavior in culture X.

(2) Blum-Kulka does not define "directness" and refers the reader to Brown and Levinson, 1978.

(3) Although this is an unnatural expression, not found in textbooks, the expression is not a transcription error.

(4) In this study, the hesitation phenomena were not actually measured. This statement is based on impressionistic reports the data collectors.

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